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SUBJECT: FIGHT OVER DEMOCRATIC SECURITY: COLOMBIA CONFLICT UPDATE FOR
OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2009

REF: REF A) 2009 BOGOTA 3617; REF B) 2010 BOGOTA 254
REF C) 2009 BOGOTA 3389; REF D) 2009 BOGOTA 3595
REF E) 2009 BOGOTA 3499

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Political Section; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Despite its weakened state, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) continued to carry out asymmetrical attacks on soft targets and executed several higher profile operations in the fourth quarter of 2009 -- including the kidnapping and execution of the governor of Caqueta and an attack in Cauca that killed nine soldiers. The number of public forces killed in service increased by 25% -- from 373 in 2008 to 468 in 2009. The FARC used its estimated 3,300 civilian militia members to help carry out attacks, to provide intelligence and to resupply its force of more than 8,000 fighters. Government of Colombia (GOC) security forces struggled to counter the FARC's guerilla insurgency tactics, and stressed that the FARC continue to enjoy safe havens in Venezuela, Ecuador and in Colombian indigenous reserves. Demobilizations, captures and kills of FARC members in 2009 were all below 2008 levels. The lower numbers in 2009 are likely due in part to military commanders acting more cautiously in the wake of the "false positive" killings. The FARC have been pushed to more remote areas and operate in smaller groups, making it harder for them to desert and harder for military forces to engage them.

¶2. (C) Still, the GOC was able to capture or kill FARC mid-level commanders this quarter, and the tempo in JTF-Omega's area of operations -- where an estimated 50% of the FARC are believed to operate -- remained high. The National Liberation Army (ELN) continued to maintain a lower profile, but managed to break one of its leaders out of jail in Arauca with help from corrupt prison officials. The ELN and the FARC announced a pact of non-aggression in December 2009. The FARC will likely increase attacks in the coming months in an effort to discredit the Government of Colombia's (GOC) democratic security policy ahead of the March and May 2010 elections. The GOC will try to grind the FARC's numbers

down further while bolstering consolidation efforts in former FARC strongholds. Two events could be potential game-changers in 2010: the capture or killing of top FARC leaders Alfonso Cano or Mono Jojoy by Colombian forces, and the acquisition and successful use of man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) by the FARC. End Summary.

BOLD ASSASSINATION SPARKS CONCERN

¶13. (C) In one of the boldest attacks in 2009, the FARC's Teofilo Forero Mobile Column abducted and killed Luis Francisco Cuellar, the Governor of Caqueta department on December 21 (ref A). Public sources reported that the FARC members wrote "James" on the governor's house, suggesting that the killing was to avenge the death of local FARC commander Hermes Triana (alias "James Patamala"). Leading daily "El Tiempo" said the event underscored the FARC's depravity and warned that the country had grown complacent and needed fresh thinking in 2010 to recover lost momentum. Local security analysts noted that the small size of the security detail protecting the Governor -- who had been kidnapped four times previously -- represented a failure by the state. Hundreds of Florencia residents organized a march on December 23 to protest the FARC's assassination and the failure of the GOC to protect him. The FARC later took credit for the killing in a communique, alleging they killed Cuellar due to his paramilitary ties. With this attack -- the highest profile political kidnapping since President Uribe came to office in 2002 -- the FARC were likely seeking to discredit Uribe's democratic security policy by demonstrating that they can still mount a high-profile attack against the state.

FARC ATTACKS ON LOCAL LEADERS CONTINUE

¶14. (C) The FARC continued to assassinate local leaders this quarter in an effort to intimidate civilian populations. The Defense Ministry reported that 9 councilmen were killed in 2009 -- down from 12 in 2008 and 80 in 2002. Some members of congress expressed concern about a FARC strategy to target national-level politicians in the pre-electoral period in 2010. Colombian army officials admitted internally that they do not have the resources to both provide security during the upcoming 2010 elections and to effectively pursue other missions. Attacks on local leaders this quarter included:

-- On October 17, the FARC killed Maria Fanny Torres and Fernando Morales, council members in Sumapaz, Cundinamarca (on the southern outskirts of Bogota).

-- On November 2, the FARC killed Villavicencio, Meta city council chair Alejandro Cepeda Baquero.

-- On November 15, FARC militia bombed the new municipal council building in Neiva, Huila; no injuries were reported, but 60% of the structure was destroyed.

-- On November 16, the FARC killed former councilman Orlando Cardenas Loaiza in Rioblanco, Tolima.

-- On December 8, the FARC killed Ricardo Perdomo, the head of the Prado, Tolima city council.

-- On December 30, the FARC detained the mayor of San Antonio, Tolima but let him go with the warning that his life had been spared "just this once."

MORE ASYMMETRICAL ATTACKS

¶ 15. (C) Following severe losses in 2008, the FARC have refrained from larger scale engagements in favor of ("Phase I") guerrilla insurgency tactics. The FARC continued to utilize improvised explosive devices (IEDs), ambushes and land mines to inflict casualties -- the majority of casualties suffered by Colombian forces in 2009 were the result of land mines. On December 1 alone, the army discovered nearly 3,000 FARC land mines in southern Tolima. The commander of the Army's 9th Mobile Brigade told us the FARC utilize mines to protect high-level FARC leaders. Attacks by the FARC this quarter included:

-- On October 14, the FARC attacked a Sadelca commercial DC-3 that had just taken off from Miraflores, Guaviare. A bullet hit the plane's fuselage, injuring a female civilian passenger.

-- On October 31, the FARC killed six civilians in Toribio, Cauca.

-- On November 20, the FARC attacked a Trans-Ipiales bus and set it on fire, burning to death six civilians, including minors, in Barbacoas, Narino. The Governor of Narino described the attack as barbaric and weekly "Cambio" featured the burned-out bus on the front cover with the title "Democratic Security in Crisis."

-- On November 29, FARC members disguised as civilians attacked two police officers in Algeciras, Huila, and killed eight civilians.

-- On December 12, the FARC attacked a police patrol in Samaniego, Narino, killing one officer and wounding six.

-- On December 7, FARC Teofilo Forero Mobile Column militia attacked the Los Andaquies Club in Neiva, injuring one guard.

-- On December 23, the FARC ambushed two policemen in Patia, Cauca with sniper fire, killing them.

-- On December 25, the FARC killed the commander of the Solita, Caqueta police force.

-- On December 29, the FARC burned two buses in Sumapaz, Cundinamarca (see ref B for a more comprehensive list of attacks).

CAUCA ATTACKS INCREASE

¶ 16. (C) In one of the worst FARC attacks of 2009, on November 10, the FARC's 6th Front attacked a military outpost in Corinto, Cauca, with home-made mortars, killing eight enlisted men and a non-commissioned officer and wounding four others. The soldiers were protecting infrastructure and had reportedly been there for two months without properly digging in. President Uribe was reportedly very concerned by this FARC attack, which contributed to the decision to relocate the Army's 3rd Division from Cali to Popayan, Cauca. General Eliseo Pena, commander of the 3rd Division at the time of the attack, was criticized for the incident by President Uribe, but later promoted to commander of the Joint Pacific Command by Army Commander General Gonzalez-Pena. Corinto and Toribio, Cauca -- both of which sustained repeated FARC attacks during 2009 -- represent important mobility corridors for the FARC near the area where FARC leader Alfonso Cano is believed to be located in Tolima. Clashes in the area have increased as Colombian military forces have expanded their footprint. "Semana" magazine reported that Toribio was attacked more than 60 times in 2009, and identified the department of Cauca as the new center of the conflict.

¶ 7. (C) "El Pais" reported on November 23 that the militia -- civilians who provide varying levels of support to FARC fighters including intelligence, supplies and operational support -- represent the FARC's "secret weapon". The article noted that the FARC could pay a civilian as little as \$500 for an assassination or to set off an explosive device. The mayor of San Vicente del Caguan told us that a FARC militia member dressed in civilian clothes assassinated a police officer near the town center on December 9. The mayor maintained that the security situation was greatly improved inside the city limits, but the FARC militia continued to extort protection money from virtually all local ranchers. Political analyst Roman Ortiz pointed to the events of November 15 in Cali, when crowds of FARC sympathizers prevented security officials from detaining alleged FARC militia member Ivan Danilo Alarcon. Ortiz noted that Colombian commanders are reluctant to engage the civilian militia partly due to legal concerns, and argued that more aggressive intelligence is needed to combat the militia in areas where they continue to exert pressure over the civilian population (such as Algeciras, Huila). The GOC estimates that there are 3,300 FARC militia members in Colombia.

MILITARY & POLICE CASUALTIES INCREASE,

CAPTURES & KILLS OF FARC & ELN DOWN

¶ 8. (C) The number of public forces killed in service increased by 25% -- from 373 in 2008 to 468 in 2009. The number of public forces wounded in service increased by 10% -- from 1,692 in 2008 to 1,852 in 2009 -- the highest level in five years. Conversely, kills of FARC members by the Colombian military were down 46% for the year (545 in 2009 compared to 1,010 in 2008), and ELN kills were down 80% in 2009 (34 in 2009 compared to 172 in 2008). Colombian forces captured 1,938 FARC in 2009, down 10% compared to 2008 when 2,168 were captured. Total ELN captures in 2009 (286) were down nearly 10% compared to 2008 levels. Part of the explanation for the decreased numbers is that there are simply fewer FARC to fight, and they have been pushed to increasingly remote areas of Colombia -- making it harder for them to demobilize and harder for Colombian forces to engage them.

2009: FARC DEMOBS DOWN, ELN DEMOBS UP

¶ 9. (C) A total of 2,128 FARC demobilized in 2009 -- down by 30% from the record number of 3,027 who demobilized in 2008. In the fourth quarter of 2009 there were 414 FARC demobilizations -- down 35% (216) from the third quarter of 2009 (ref C). Total 2009 demobilizations were highest in the Eastern Bloc (35%) where more FARC fighters were present and where military pressure was greater, followed by the Southern Bloc (25%). More than half of the FARC members who deserted in 2009 had been with the FARC for more than five years. The top reasons cited in 2009 for demobilizing were: a desire for a change of lifestyle (33%), mistreatment by FARC superiors (30%) and pressure from Colombian troops (18%). Desertions due to military pressure rose by 10% over the last quarter, suggesting renewed GOC military activity during the fourth quarter of 2009.

¶ 10. (C) A total of 492 ELN demobilized in 2009 -- an increase of more than 20% from 2008 levels (403). Ninety-six ELN members demobilized in the fourth quarter of 2009. ELN demobilizations remained highest (nearly 50%) in the southwest area of the country due to military pressure and fighting between the FARC and other criminal groups. As with the FARC, there was a 10% increase in deserters who cited military pressure as the principal cause for deserting this quarter.

OP TEMPO SLOWER,

BUT JTF-OMEGA STILL BUSY

¶11. (S/NF) In a December 18 meeting, now Vice Minister of Defense Jorge Mario Eastman told us that 2009 had been a "disaster" from an operational perspective. Eastman confirmed that one of several factors is the army's reluctance to engage the enemy for fear of allegations of human rights abuses. Eastman also criticized Army Commander General Gonzalez-Pena and Deputy Commander General Ardila as weak leaders. Security analyst Alfredo Rangel reported in "Semana" weekly on December 21 that the number of army operations had fallen 50% in Cauca, 30% in Caqueta, 20% in Narino, and 54% in Meta. Rangel said the operational tempo decreased because commanders are acting more cautiously in the wake of the "false positive" (military murders of civilians presented as combat kills) scandals. He commented privately to us that the impressive gains of 2008 could not have been sustained indefinitely; some leveling-off was inevitable.

¶12. (S/NF) The Joint Forces Decisive Action Unit (FUCAD) and the Rapid Deployment Force (FUDRA) were still co-located in the JTF-Omega area during this quarter to pursue FARC Secretariat member alias Mono Jojoy and to maintain pressure on the FARC's 27th, 52nd and 53rd Fronts. Approximately half of the FARC's total fighting force is believed to be located in the JTF-Omega area. The FARC refrained from directly engaging Colombian forces in JTF-Omega, operated in smaller units, favored ambushes and sniper attacks on isolated Colombian forces, and increased land mine usage. Still, the operations tempo in JTF-Omega remained relatively high during this quarter. Successes in the fourth quarter included separate air raids on October 1, November 15 and November 28 that killed approximately 40 FARC fighters. JTF Commander General Javier Florez told us that U.S. assistance with intelligence but more importantly with air mobility had been critical to these successes, and worried about the effect of budget cuts - he stressed that "one day more for operations in Omega is one day less for the FARC."

FARC LEADERSHIP

¶13. (C) FARC leader Alfonso Cano is still believed to be located in the "Canon de las Hermosas" region of Tolima department -- a mountainous, 2,000 square-kilometer area with access to Huila, Valle de Cauca and Cauca. Both Alfonso and Mono Jojoy are believed to operate at high altitudes that are not accessible by Colombian helicopters. "El Espectador" reported on November 23 that as FARC leaders Alfonso Cano and Mono Jojoy are hemmed in by military pressure in Colombia, the Secretariat members believed to be located in Venezuela are more active -- with alias Ivan Marquez giving more front line military orders and alias Timochenko becoming the FARC's "new international spokesman" following the March 2008 killing of Raul Reyes.

GOC PROTESTS FARC SAFE HAVENS

¶14. (C) In an interview on December 21, former Defense Minister and presidential pre-candidate Juan Manuel Santos postulated that "were it not for safe havens in neighboring countries, the FARC would be defeated by now, but they use the borders to escape from the democratic security's forcefulness." Santos said that GOC had informed the Venezuelan government "in every possible way" to capture, deport and extradite the terrorists but the Venezuelans had not responded. Commanders in Narino complained that the FARC

leaders such as alias "Tovar" and "Rambo" fight in Colombia during the day and sleep in Ecuador at night. Military commanders also complained that the FARC are retreating into indigenous reserves (see septel) and national parks where public forces are reluctant to pursue them. On February 1 Catholic Priest Dario Echeverri said from his firsthand experience that the FARC have their camps immediately across the Arauca river inside the Venezuelan border -- the FARC camps are North of Arauca, and the ELN are to the west, across from the town of Arauquita (in Apure State).

MORE MID-LEVEL SUCCESSES

¶15. (C) Although FARC Secretariat members continued to elude Colombian forces, the Colombian military and police continued to kill and capture a string of mid-level commanders. "Semana" reported on December 26 that twelve commanders were knocked out of action in 2009, commenting that although not as dazzling as 2008, this strategically important achievement was the product of solid intelligence work and collaboration between the police and the armed forces. Mid-level successes this quarter included:

-- On October 24, Colombian forces killed Hermes Triana (alias "James Patamala"), the second in command of the FARC's Teofilo Forero Mobile Column in Puerto Rico, Cauca. He was a 15-year FARC veteran and believed to have been involved in the 2003 attack on Bogota's El Nogal Club, the murders of the Turbay Cote family in 2000 and an attempt on the life of President Uribe.

-- On October 30, police captured Maribel Gallego Rubio, alias Martiza, in Bogota. She is believed to have been in contact with the FARC Secretariat and specialized in acquiring technological equipment and supplies for the FARC.

-- On November 9 in San Jose de Guaviare, army forces killed Nelson Velasquez, alias "Gordo Nelson," commander of the FARC's 44th Front and a member of the FARC's Central Staff.

-- On December 1, military forces killed the second in command of the FARC's 50th Front, Jairo Antonio Salas, alias "Manuel Franco," in Ibagué, Tolima.

-- On December 16, a joint police military operation in a rural area of Antioquia killed Ruben Garcia, alias "Danilo," chief of the FARC's 9th Front and a member of the General Staff. Danilo was a 25-year FARC veteran and was believed to be involved in the 1999 attack on San Francisco, Antioquia in which 36 people died. Defense Minister Silva said "this is evidence that Democratic Security is working."

-- On January 1, 2010, a Colombian air force raid killed approximately 15 members of the FARC's 43rd Front near Vista Hermosa, Meta, where an estimated 150 FARC members were celebrating the New Year. Three FARC commanders believed to be part of Mono Jojoy's security ring were killed: Miller Ospina Correa (alias "El Abuelo"), Eliseo Caicedo Garzon (alias "El Pitufo") and Alberto Ruiz (alias "El Negro Alberto").

FARC & ELN ANNOUNCE NON-AGGRESSION PACT

¶16. (C) The FARC and ELN issued a joint communique in mid-December announcing a non-aggression pact between the two organizations (ref D). The pact was allegedly brokered in Venezuela between ELN leader Nicolas Rodriguez Bautista (alias "El Gabino") and FARC Secretariat member alias "Ivan Marquez." Minister Silva said that the pact showed the organizations are in a weakened state and are desperate for political oxygen. Similar non-aggression pacts in the past have been short-lived as the two organizations have clashed for control of the lucrative drug trade, particularly along

the borders with Venezuela and Ecuador. General Padilla on December 16 said that the alliance would be impossible to implement at an operational level. On February 1, Catholic Priest Father Echeverri told us that the church had been asked to mediate between the two groups in Arauca in January 2010, but the Church was later informed that the talks had been cancelled. (Comment: The military is engaged in a three-pronged war against the FARC, ELN and emerging criminal bands (BACRIM) -- the emergence of the BACRIM has diverted more resources and operations away from the fight against the FARC.)

ELN BREAKS PABLITO OUT OF JAIL

¶17. (C) On October 7, ELN leader Carlos Marin Guarin, alias Pablito, escaped from jail in Arauca and reportedly fled to Venezuela. The website utilized by the ELN for publishing its communiquees noted that the rescue was "a refutation of the supposed omnipotence of the Democratic Security Policy so much spoken about by President Uribe." The escape was aided and abetted by corrupt state agents and prison personnel. Pablito had been the highest-ranking ELN rebel to have been captured in five decades. President Uribe acknowledged that the escape was a blemish on the GOC's democratic security policy.

DEBATE RAGES OVER DEMOCRATIC SECURITY

¶18. (C) Corporacion Nuevo Arco Iris (CNAI), a left-of-center think tank, reported that as of October 20, the FARC had recorded 1,429 actions, 30% more than in all of 2008 -- casting doubt on the continued viability of the government's policies. The report noted that while the GOC had enjoyed military successes, the FARC increased in strength in Cauca, Narino, Antioquia, and on the Venezuelan border. The CNAI report maintained the FARC still have 11,500 members (Defense Ministry estimates put the number at 8,248 FARC fighters and 3,300 FARC militia members). In a November 27 meeting with the Ambassador, CNAI Director Leon Valencia alluded to President Uribe's harsh criticism of the report (see Ref E).

¶19. (C) Former Defense Minister and current presidential candidate Juan Manuel Santos publicly repudiated the CNAI report, arguing that the numbers were incorrect because they included all clashes as if they were FARC attacks. Santos alleged that the NGO had a political agenda, said that report is "full of false information" and called its conclusions "subjective and poisonous." The director of the think tank CERAC, Jorge Restrepo, told us that CNAI used CERAC's figures and had in fact mistakenly counted all attacks as if they were perpetrated by the FARC. Still, Restrepo noted that overall attacks by the FARC were up in 2009, and the scathing reaction from Santos and other GOC officials effectively branded those with viewpoints opposed to the government as enemies. "New Ideas for Peace Foundation Director" Maria Victoria Llorente told us the GOC's harsh reaction to the report was counter-productive and probably boosted the report's readership. The Embassy's force protection unit counted approximately 1,000 attacks by the FARC in 2009, observing that these statistics vary widely because there is no clear definition as to what constitutes an attack.

COMMENT

¶20. (C) Reeling from severe losses in 2008, the FARC have adapted by increasing asymmetrical attacks on soft targets in an effort to discredit the GOC's democratic security policy before the 2010 elections. In a December 2009 communique, the FARC pronounced the

GOC policy a "major military failure, as proved by the figures which show the clash with the guerrillas has intensified nationwide." GOC officials were quick to assert that the security plan was still effective after military victories in 2009. The FARC have undoubtedly been weakened in the last two years -- their estimated fighting force of 8,248 is equivalent to their strength in 1990 and far from their estimated peak of 20,000 in 2001. Still, think tank director Maria Victoria Llorente assessed the FARC are becoming more radicalized -- more brazen operationally and less likely to enter the political mainstream. Many local analysts agree that the FARC will seek to effect higher profile attacks ahead of the 2010 elections, while the GOC will continue to grind the FARC down. Two events could change the course of the conflict in 2010: the capture or killing of Secretariat leaders Alfonso Cano or Mono Jojoy by Colombian forces -- which could quicken the pace of demobilizations among FARC ranks; and the acquisition and successful use of MANPADs by the FARC -- which could hinder the GOC's mobility and air supremacy which have been critical to its successes. End comment.

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